

First-Aid for Childhood

The Child and the Machine: Why Computers May Put Our Children's Education at Risk. Alison Armstrong and Charles Casement. Key Porter, 1998. 257 pp. \$21.95. ISBN 1-55263-004-8.

The Child and the Machine is a book with a message: computers are pretty bad things for your children. I could not agree more with the authors' general direction and key assertions. Though not educators, they have created a valuable resource for anyone who wants to defend an agenda not enamoured with technology. The book has flaws, particularly in some superficial arguments, a lack of sophistication with technology, and a misunderstanding of the difference between bad technology and bad pedagogy/curriculum. Its strengths, however, are manifold.

First of all, *The Child and the Machine* challenges the hegemonic tidal wave of enthusiasm for technology and the corporations that promote it. This is the wave that strikes fear into parents and starts kids on computers before they have the capacity to benefit from them. This wave has little to do with pedagogy, but rather fictions of global competitiveness. The authors do a wonderful job of raising questions about what computers do to growing bodies and minds. A child should have people, places, and things to interact with. Wood, wind, mud and sky are more important to making a math genius, poet, hacker, or manager than *any* software program. They also address the costs of computers, and what technology does to other aspects of learning. Computers are resource hogs, and they result in the loss of teacher/student contact, in the loss of librarians to help mediate a child's way through information, and the loss of real interactions with other people, which isolates children.

In the right hands, computers and the Internet can bring forth great advances in student learning. The failing of *The Child and the Machine* is that the authors are so busy trashing technology that they never really clarify the fact that many complaints about technology are predicated on poorly-written software, poorly-designed computers, bad pedagogy and curriculum, and a lack of critical thinking on the part of school boards. None of these factors makes computers bad forever, just inappropriate at present. While the book is very well researched, the authors lack an in-depth knowledge of the Internet that would lead them to truly ground-breaking work, such as collaborative virtual learning environments, and stick to the most sensational dead-ends of technology.

Buy this book, and use it for its strengths. Technology is with us, and everyone must learn as much about it as possible so as to not be overwhelmed or marginalized by it. But it is okay if a student starts using computers at 15 or 18 years old. Why not let children play and learn, and exercise their muscles and minds before we cast the yoke of technology needlessly on their shoulders just to meet someone's bottom line?

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